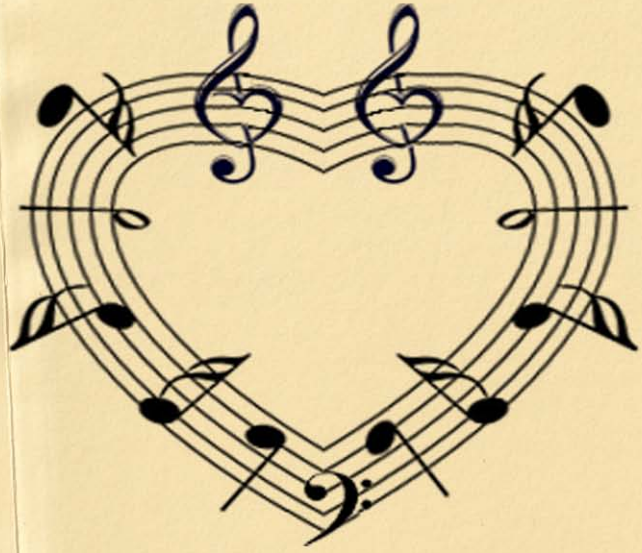
The Sensuality of Music



Lionel Hartley

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Introduction

Recently, as a boy soprano, I sang the solo voice for Jean Sibelius's Finlandia with the Christchurch Symphony Orchestra.

Finlandia was originally written as a tone poem without words, and so in the full orchestral piece the soloist enters after the initial orchestral build-up of the hymn tune (the Andante maestoso section).

To sing the vocal line meant my waiting and counting a 30-bar phrase before I started to sing, "Be Still my Soul...".

The emotion in auditorium was palpable. So much so that our Yugoslavian conductor Vanèo Èavdarski was in tears when I started to sing the solo.

I asked him afterwards if I had done something wrong, but he assured me that it was what he called "the *senzuálnôst* (sensuality) of the music".

Picking up on that phrase, '*the sensuality of music*', I investigated what it was about music that it could be labelled sensual.

This booklet is the result of that investigation.

— Lionel Hartley,
Christchurch, 1976

Chapter 1 The Physiology of Sound

Ludwig van Beethoven said, “Music is the meditation between the intellectual and the sensuous life.”

Music is the most visceral of the arts; it bypasses the intellect and vibrates directly inside the human body.

Carl Maria von Weber wrote “Music is love itself. It is the purest, most ethereal language of passion, showing in a thousand ways all possible changes of colour and feeling; and though true in only a single instance, it yet can be

understood by thousands of men, who all feel differently."

Sensuality is moving beyond intellectual appreciation into the realm of tactile, emotional, and physical arousal.

Often composers use timbre (tone colour), texture, and dynamics to mimic the human breath, heartbeat, and touch.

William Congrieve wrote, "Music alone with sudden charms can bind The wand'ring sense, and calm the mind" (Hymn to Harmony).

Prior to the 20th. century, overt sensuality in music often had to be veiled behind mythology, exoticism, or dramatic narrative to bypass cultural censorship.

Music is inherently sensuous

because it speaks directly to our biology, bypassing language and intellectual filtering to vibrate within our bodies.

Several distinct physical, neurological, and emotional factors explain why sound has such a profound, tactile effect on us:

1) The Physics of Vibration

Sound is literally physical pressure waves moving through the air.

When you listen to music, those waves collide with your eardrum and travel through your nervous system, causing physical structures in your body — like your chest cavity, skull, and skin — to physically resonate.

You do not just hear music with

your ears; your whole body feels it.

John Philip Sousa said, " Jazz will endure just as long as people hear it through their feet instead of their brains".

It was recorded in *The Auricle*, Vol. II, No. 6, March 1924 that deaf and blind Helen Keller wrote the following letter to the New York Symphony Orchestra.

Here's how she describes listening to Beethoven's "Ninth Symphony" over the radio:

"Dear Friends:

I have the joy of being able to tell you that, though deaf and blind, I spent a glorious hour last night listening over the radio to Beethoven's "Ninth Symphony." I do not mean to say that I

"heard" the music in the sense that other people heard it; and I do not know whether I can make you understand how it was possible for me to derive pleasure from the symphony. It was a great surprise to myself.

I had been reading in my magazine for the blind of the happiness that the radio was bringing to the sightless everywhere. I was delighted to know that the blind had gained a new source of enjoyment; but I did not dream that I could have any part in their joy.

Last night, when the family was listening to your wonderful rendering of the immortal symphony someone suggested that I put my hand on the receiver and see if I could get any of the vibrations. He

unscrewed the cap, and I lightly touched the sensitive diaphragm.

What was my amazement to discover that I could feel, not only the vibration, but also the impassioned rhythm, the throb and the urge of the music! The intertwined and intermingling vibrations from different instruments enchanted me. I could actually distinguish the cornets, the roil of the drums, deep-toned violas and violins singing in exquisite unison.

How the lovely speech of the violins flowed and plowed over the deepest tones of the other instruments! When the human voices leaped up thrilling from the surge of harmony, I recognized them instantly as voices more ecstatic, upcurving swift and flame-like, until my

heart almost stood still. The women's voices seemed an embodiment of all the angelic voices rushing in a harmonious flood of beautiful and inspiring sound.

The great chorus throbbed against my fingers with poignant pause and flow. Then all the instruments and voices together burst forth – an ocean of heavenly vibration – and died away like winds when the atom is spent, ending in a delicate shower of sweet notes.

Of course this was not "hearing," but I do know that the tones and harmonies conveyed to me moods of great beauty and majesty. I also sense, or thought I did, the tender sounds of nature that sing into my hand-swaying reeds and winds and

the murmur of streams. I have never been so enraptured before by a multitude of tone-vibrations.

As I listened, with darkness and melody, shadow and sound filling all the room, I could not help remembering that the great composer who poured forth such a flood of sweetness into the world was deaf like myself.

I marveled at the power of his quenchless spirit by which out of his pain he wrought such joy for others – and there I sat, feeling with my hand the magnificent symphony which broke like a sea upon the silent shores of his soul and mine."

2) Neurological Wiring

Music stimulates the brain's reward system, releasing

dopamine (the same neurotransmitter associated with food, touch, and romantic affection).

Neural pathways connect our auditory cortex directly to the limbic system —t he emotional and sensory processing centre of the brain.

3) Mimicry of the Human Body

Music mimics the fundamental rhythms of human life. A slow, lingering tempo mirrors resting heart rates and deep, relaxed breathing, while a fast, driving rhythm mirrors physical exertion, excitement, and arousal.

Crescendos and decrescendos map onto the natural rise and

fall of physical tension and release.

4) Timbre as "Texture

Just as silk feels different from wool, different instruments possess unique sonic textures or timbres.

A breathy flute, a husky cello, or a rich human voice carries sonic information that our brains instinctively associate with physical proximity and intimacy.

5) Chapter Summary

"Music has charms to soothe a savage breast" (William Congreve, The Mourning Bride).

Ultimately, music is sensuous because it acts as an invisible form of touch — a way for one

human consciousness to physically move and alter the emotional state of another through time and space.

This was highlighted in the opening paragraphs of Oscar Wilde's 'The Importance of Being Earnest' where the writer has the character Algernon saying, "... I don't play accurately. Anyone can play accurately, but I play with wonderful expression. As far as the piano is concerned, sentiment is my forte. I keep science for Life".

Chapter 2 A brief history of Sensual Progression

Over time, music has morphed from simple rhythms into complex compositions. Each era introduced new styles and instruments, shaping societies and cultural identity.

It obviously started with the human voice. The French novelist Valentin Louis Georges Eugène Marcel Proust wrote, “What an instrument is the human voice. How wonderfully responsive to every emotion of the soul.” Miguel de Cervantes wrote, “He who sings frightens away his ills”.

Part 1 Storytelling and Rituals

Early civilizations used natural sounds and handmade instruments to create melodies, narrate stories and pass on myths and legends.

Originally, humans created music using their feet, hands and voices, and natural elements like wind, water, and mimicking animal sounds.

Later the very first musical instruments were invented by Jubal the son of Lamech as recorded in Genesis 4:21

Musical instruments were also invented by David (1 Chronicles 23:5; 2 Chronicles 7:6) and the Jews were celebrated for inventing musical instruments (Amos 6:5).

Part 2 Cultural Identity

National, religious and ceremonial music developed unique structures, preserving traditions while inspiring future generations and unique folk music was used to identify one particular community from another.

Archaeological discoveries reveal that music played an essential role in the rituals, entertainment and story-telling of early civilizations in Ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and China.

In China, the pentatonic scale was invented and became a staple of the Chinese art form. In Greece, Pythagoras linked music to mathematical harmony. In India and the

Middle East, unique stringed instruments led to the development of their distinctive styles.

Plato wrote, “Music is a moral law. It gives soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination and charm and gaiety to life and to everything”.

Part 3 Baroque & Classical Foundations

During this period, significant advancements were made in musical notation and composition, especially polyphony.

Prior to this, music was primarily passed down through oral tradition. Written notation meant that musicians could

write down melodies to share them across geographical, social and cultural boundaries. A Turkish Proverb says, “As the music is, so are the people of the country”.

Secular music with ballads and folk songs also crossed national boundaries by troubadours and minstrels, often accompanied by early stringed instruments.

a) The Pulse of Life

Example:
Claudio Monteverdi, in “L’Orfeo” (“Possente spirto”, 1607), pioneered the “stile concitato” and florid vocal ornamentation to mirror the intoxicating, hypnotic power of erotic persuasion and desire.

b) The Intimacy of Chamber

Music

Example
Johann Sebastian Bach, for example in the "Cello Suite No. 1 in G Major" (Sarabande, c. 1720)". The slow, lingering tempo and emphasis on the heavy second beat create a gravity and physical weight that feels remarkably bodily and grounded.

Part 4 Romanticism and the Language of Yearning

19th-century composers stretched harmony, creating chords that refused to resolve, mirroring the psychological and physical state of unfulfilled desire (suspension and release).

Examples
Frédéric Chopin – "Nocturne in

C-sharp Minor" (1830 posthumous)

The nocturnal, intimate atmosphere designed for private parlours, mimicking whispered secrets and romantic melancholy.

Richard Wagner – "Tristan und Isolde" (Prelude, 1859)

A musical depiction of consuming, agonizing sensual tension and longing, anchored by the now famous "Tristan chord" that deliberately refuses any resolution.

Part 5 Impressionism and Exoticism

Pure sensation, colour, touch, and atmosphere .Turn-of-the-century composers treated sound like a physical texture or

a caress.

Examples

Claude Debussy – "Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune" (1894)

Described as sensual indolence translated into sound. The sinuous, chromatic flute line winds lazily, capturing the drowsy, heat-drenched physical desires of a mythological creature.

Maurice Ravel – "Boléro" (1928)

A repeating pattern of rhythmic hypnosis and gradual crescendo. The unyielding snare drum rhythm and swelling orchestration simulate a slow, hypnotic, and intoxicating build-up of physical energy. Maurice Ravel wrote "We should always remember that

sensitiveness and emotion constitute the real content of a work of art."

Part 6 The Non-Sensuous

Medieval Polyphony *(See also Chapter 4)*

Early sacred polyphony often treated music as an architectural, almost mathematical reflection of divine order. Melodies were secondary to strict geometric ratios, and the smooth, disembodied vocal blending (often without instrumental warmth or heavy rhythmic pulses) was designed to lift the mind entirely away from earthly, bodily concerns toward heaven.

Example
Monophonic melodies, sung in

Latin, such as Gregorian chants (named after Pope Gregory I around 600AD, became a dominant form of religious music for a time steering the worshipers away from the sensuality of music.

How unlike Psalm 150:3-5, "Praise him with the sound of the trumpet: praise him with the psaltery and harp. Praise him with the timbrel and dance: praise him with stringed instruments and organs. Praise him upon the loud cymbals: praise him upon the high sounding cymbals."

Part 7 Chapter Summary

Music progressed from mere rhythms through to polyphony and the geometry of the Baroque to the raw, pulsing

soma of the early 20th century. Music does not just describe sensuality, it lives and breathes it deep within our nervous systems.

In contrast, the problem with many modern songs that one hears nowadays is that the lyricist forgot to put them to music.

Maybe I am being too harsh on the present generation, because back in 1759 Jean François Marie Arouet de Voltaire in "Candide" wrote, "Music nowadays is merely the art of executing difficulties and in the end that which is only difficult ceases to please".

Chapter 3 Problems with the Sensuality of Music

Throughout history, the power of sensuous music to bypass the intellect and directly influence the body has made it a target of moral, religious, and political anxiety.

Because music can evoke passion, desire, and uninhibited physical movement so easily, moral critics across different eras have flagged several core concerns:

1) Loss of Rational Control

A primary fear is that sensual music lowers our rational

defences. By stimulating the limbic system and encouraging physical surrender (such as dance or ecstatic trance), sensual music is viewed as a threat to self-control, moral restraint, and higher reasoning.

2) Incitement of Base Desires

Music that mimics or evokes physical intimacy, longing, or bodily arousal has frequently been condemned for corrupting public morals, encouraging promiscuity, or undermining traditional family and social structures.

3) Idolatry and Emotional Excess

In religious contexts (such as early Christianity, strict Puritanism, or Islamic legal

traditions), deeply sensual or overly ornate music was often seen as dangerous because it turned worship into an emotional or aesthetic indulgence.

The concern was that the worshiper would fall in love with the "feeling" of the music rather than divine truth. This is an accusation often levelled at the charismatic movement.

4) Aesthetic Manipulation and Propaganda

On a broader social scale, authorities have worried about the "hypnotic" nature of sensuous rhythms and massed sonorities or plangencies.

Because music can bypass critical thinking to evoke a

visceral, unified crowd response, it has historically been feared (and weaponised) as a tool for emotional manipulation and social destabilization.

Martin Luther insisted, “The devil should not be allowed to keep all the best tunes for himself”.

William Booth, co-founder of the Salvation Army said, “Secular music, do you say, belongs to the devil? Does it? Well, if it did I would plunder him for it, for he has no right to a single note of the whole seven. Every note, and every strain, and every harmony is divine and belongs to us. So consecrate your voice and your instruments. Offer them to God, and use them to make all the hearts about you merry before the Lord.”

Ultimately, these moral anxieties that I have mentioned in this chapter stem from the same basic quality that makes music beautiful, and that is its intense, immediate intimacy with the human nervous system.

Chapter 4 Moving Away From the Sensuality of Music

While almost all music contains some baseline of physical rhythm or human breath, certain musical genres and styles intentionally strip away warmth, emotion, physical pulse, and bodily resonance to prioritise the intellect, mathematical structure, or pure abstraction.

Here are a few examples of music that moves away from the sensuous:

1) Medieval Polyphony

Music such as Gregorian chant has already been discussed in Chapter 2.

2) High Serialism

Harsh 12-Tone Music pioneered by Arnold Schönberg (1874 – 1951) and pushed to its mathematical extreme by organising pitches, rhythms, and dynamics through strict, non-repeating mathematical series.

This intentionally avoids emotional predictability, traditional cadence (which mimics tension and release), and organic flow, resulting in an angular, cerebral sonic landscape.

3) Radical Minimalism

While some minimalism is

deeply hypnotic, more recent composers are writing ultra-quiet, static, and sparse music that exists in a state of suspended time. With no driving rhythm, no dynamic peaks, and barely any harmonic movement, it feels weightless, ethereal, and emotionally austere rather than bodily.

4) Subliminal Music

Promoted by, for example Zen Buddhism, Subliminal Music supposedly creates a hypnotic state of deep relaxation allegedly producing healing, emotional detoxification and sleep induction.

5) Algorithmic and Synthesised Music

Purely academic stochastic

music often prioritises the objective processing of data over human performance. Without the physical friction of a human hand plucking a string or a singer's breath, it can sound sterile, cold, and deliberately mechanical.

For example
The *Doctor Who* theme music (1963 by Ron Grainer).

Chapter Summary

In short, music that is "cerebral, strictly mathematical, weightless, or radically detached from the human pulse" sits at the opposite end of the spectrum from the sensuous.

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